

**Interview with Aaron Georgelas
conducted by Sue Kovach Shuman for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

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Sue: We are speaking to Aaron Georgelas and I am Sue Shuman and this is Linda Byrne from local District Supervisor Linda Smyth's office and this is about the Providence Perspective and its July 2010 and we are going to talk to you a little bit about looking back at Providence District and in your case I guess we'll go ahead. And you may be the youngest, one of the youngest people we are interviewing; but you grew up here and you were born in this area. So we'd like you to tell a little bit about what your childhood was like.

Aaron: Well I was born at Fairfax Hospital, grew up on Kirby Road in McLean. We lived; you know we had a phenomenal upbringing in Providence District. We bicycled everywhere as children. We lived right on Pimit Run; so we played in the creeks and truly enjoyed growing up here, raising my children here. I went to Chesterbrook Elementary school and Longfellow. You know it has always just been a great community. My friends lived all around me, friends that I still have today. I remember we use to ride our bicycles from Kirby Road all through back roads to downtown McLean. I worked at Stalcups in the middle of McLean growing up which was just a food stand basically. They've been around for a very long time. And I worked in McLean Hardware growing up. Growing up here has been fantastic; I played little league, ankles bitters football, played lacrosse, went to McLean High School.

Sue: You are managing partner of the Georgelas Group. Would you like to tell us a little bit about what that means?

Aaron: Yeah, well the Georgelas Group has been in McLean for 45 years. It was started by my grandfather who moved to the area as he worked on the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. And in 1964 he started building one house at a time in McLean and as he retired he built more and more and before you knew it

he was building a hundred at a time and developing. And my father and my uncles came on right out of college and they started doing different types of development. We've built a lot of what is in McLean, Fairfax, Vienna and I joined the company ten years ago. I was with Nortel Networks as a product strategist and my role as a partner has been to bring in and execute on mixed use developments. And what I do is handle everything from land acquisitions to entitlements and bringing the vision to life. And that's what we're focused on doing right now and that's mainly around a metro station in Tyson's Corner.

Sue: As the Company website has can you describe for us what your vision for Tysons will be 20 years from now.

Aaron: Twenty years from now what I see is – I see four new destinations all centered around the metro stops in Tyson's Corner. I see vibrant retail around the metro stations, there is actually something there when you get on and off the metro. I believe that we will have active places very similar to what we see today in Arlington or in Reston. But I think we will have that around the metro stations at Springhill Road and Route 7.

I think we will have a very large population of residents in Tyson's Corner in twenty years. Right now we do not have a large population; the whole personality of Tyson's Corner is going to change. I think it will be more urban and a place where people will want to go, I think it will be a place that people will think of on weekends where they are going to spend time as they do today when they go to Reston and down to D.C. I think Tyson's Corner is going to be on that list of places to go. Where today it's – if you want to go shopping it's on your list but if you want to go meet your friends for dinner it's not on your list.

Sue: So it will be a Ballston in a way and a magnet like that. Let's back up just a little bit.

Aaron: Sure.

Sue: Now you said when you were a kid you rode your bike everywhere and you have fond memories of that. This won't be that kind of place; this won't attract families with little kids what your vision of what Tyson's might because you're

saying it's residential as well as well as entertainment and other destination. So will that exclude families?

Aaron: Well, one of the things we have to understand is Tyson's Corner has never been welcoming for families. I never rode my bicycle in Tyson's Corner it was too dangerous to get here. One of the things our new plan does is it creates bike lanes throughout Tyson's Corner. So I can see my kids riding their bicycles in Tyson's Corner similarly to kids who ride their bicycles into Reston today. Today you can't do that, today you take your life – I'm an avid bicyclist today and I won't ride into Tyson's and I live two miles from my office.

Sue: Where do you ride?

Aaron: On the Washington & Old Dominion trail.

Sue: Okay.

Aaron: I live right off the bike trail and I ride it every day at 5 O'clock in the morning or at 5:30.

Sue: That's a good endorsement for that.

Aaron: Absolutely, we're big supporters of the trail. I think that what we'll see in Tyson's Corner is a natural selection. The type of residential that we'll be building in Tyson's Corner will have some component of families but it's also going to be a similar component to what you see in Arlington. People as they go from coming out of college and filling our professional jobs they're kind of in that condo apartment phase for 5 to 10 years. So they select that as a place to live and they need and want all those amenities of what they need around them. And then they self-select to go to a townhouse and they self-select to go to a home, a single family home.

So what these urban areas, in my vision, do is they provide that step, you know. I don't know if you are really going to have people – like in a neighborhood where I live today a very large percentage of people will be there for 25 years or more. Whereas

Sue: And this neighborhood is Vienna?

Aaron: Yes, Vienna and but in urban areas like Ballston you don't have that – they don't necessarily stay in one house for 25 years. They may be in an apartment but they may move half a mile away to a townhouse and then another half mile away into Vienna just like I've done. I've lived within 2 or 3 miles of Tyson's Corner as a core, for my whole life. But I've been in an apartment, I've been in a townhouse and now I'm in a house. So I think that Tysons Corner doesn't necessarily need to support all the family. In the general consensus we are seeing and the numbers we are seeing is that we have a huge void in Fairfax County for that type of, for that product – for that type of home. For the high rise condo home apartment we are woefully short. And that's why a lot of people are living in Arlington. In Arlington they have a tremendous pool of that housing so I think that is a play for Tysons Corner to fill that void.

Sue: Let me ask you since you have lived in this area and you are working in this area you went to college in Utah.

Aaron: Um hum.

Sue: Why Utah.

Aaron: My whole family came to this country including my mom's and my grandfather's side as miners in Utah. So I am a third generation University of Utah student. My grandfather was the first one in my family to go to college. And my father and I and all my brothers and uncles have all gone to the University of Utah.

Sue: And you studied business and finance?

Aaron: Yes, ma'am.

Sue: And obviously now is coming in handy – relevant. Now ah the Georgelas Group has building concerns in France, and Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Do you see yourself being involved also with the expansion say after Tyson's or are you going to stay here?

Aaron: We always have had an international presence. My family, my grandfather was in the military he was a Colonel and they moved a lot. So they were all over the world; so we have ties all over the world. But ninety five percent of what we have done has been in Fairfax County and in the D.C. metro. My focus right now is to make Tysons West a success. And we have a very large development that we are doing there and it is probably a twenty year development. So I'm just trying to keep up with what we have going right now in Tysons Corners.

Sue: So should I ask you that again at age fifty four maybe?

Aaron: Yes ma'am, we'll see how we are doing. If we're doing really well then we will all be excited and we will be doing more. But I think Tysons Corner is a tremendous opportunity. It's a very unique place in the country and I'm very lucky to be working on it.

Sue: Can you tell me what things in this area in Providence District are attractive to live here. What would be - you live here your family is here you came back from college but what will you tell somebody who is thinking about moving to Providence District to Tysons Corner to Fairfax. Why, what's the best thing about being here.

Aaron: What is the best thing about being here? I think it's the culture to me there are so many things that we can do here. Very selfishly I can take my kids to the zoo, I can take them to the beach, I can take them hiking, I can take them climbing and then those are just the basic right off the cuff things. Then you have the best schools, you have the best parks, you have the best little league systems. You've got all of these things that we are at the top of the list all the way down the line. And it makes it a very special place.

Sue: Okay, Linda you have a question.

Linda: No, I didn't but I just find it very interesting that you've grown up here but your family business is kind of worldwide and so you bring the worldwide perspective to Tysons Corner which is something that I think is something that we

need – are you finding that difficult to get across in an area that is typically not looked at development in that way?

Aaron: I think it changes the challenge, right – I mean change is a challenge period no matter what it is and believing that the urban model will work in Tysons Corner is very difficult for people to grasp. They have a tough time visualizing what is – you know when all these car dealerships go away what is it going to look at, how is it really going to feel, am I gonna want to be there? So the best way we've been able to overcome that is just try and give them the analogies of we're building the Reston Town Center, we're building the Ballston, the Bethesda Road. That's the vision for what we're trying to do there where people can live work and play. But yeah I see a lot of people are sitting back thinking I'll believe it when I see it. They have a tough time overcoming what they believe is going to happen there. And this urban model is not new. I mean Rome is an urban model; it's a consolidation of resources and what I see in my and what I hope to do is stop the expansion to the hinterlands for the growth. We're going to continue to grow no matter what, people are moving here and there are jobs citizens are moving and they're moving to Providence District; they are moving to Fairfax County. So if we can expand our base of office and base of housing units and we can do it on metro in Tysons Corner people will kind of come around and say okay I get it – I don't want to jam more houses into Great Falls or Herndon or what have you. I'd rather see it be more vertical than spread out.

Sue: Um hum now with transportation we do have metro coming there but what about other transportation infrastructure will it be car and metro or will there be other viable transportation

Aaron: We are very much focused on a multimodal approach when it comes to transportation, bicycles, circulator routes, buses, zip car. A lot of these technologies that are just phenomenally successful in other areas, we want to be the first zip car location in Tysons Corner. The bike sharing programs are all working. And we plan to not only use them but will promote them and have a whole campaign to help with the absorption of those things.

Sue: Other developers perhaps are not as bike friendly as you. It's probably – it's good to me to hear this hearting approach for people like me who drive but hate to. And avoid Tysons Corner.

Aaron: Like the plague.

Sue: Well pretty much.

Aaron: There's no safe way to get in and out of Tysons Corner on your own bike.

Sue: Yeah exactly. Now you do travel a lot for your work. So you bring these ideas back in transportation and development. What about other ideas culturally. We're an international group; this is not a homogenous group this area. There are people from all over the world living here. How does that help you in deciding what this vision and what this future will be?

Aaron: It allows us to provide – you know one of the things we're creating right at our metro station at Tysons West is its true destination and what creates a destination is a number of different things: Having a cosmopolitan society and all of these people that are from different parts of the world allow us a more colorful pallet to play with. You know we can go with the more extreme restaurants. It's not just basic – you know if I was in Utah or Salt Lake City there is a very succinct pallet of restaurants. We're not going to have a Lebanese Taverna in Salt Lake City; we're not going to have a Kabob place. Those things are just not

Sue: But there are actually really good breweries right now that just started right down town and not out here.

Aaron: Right and we will have a collage that opens up that pallet. Also in what we're doing we believe the arts are something that we have done very well in Fairfax County. So we are inviting in – we are calling ourselves an arts entertainment destination but we do mean it. We are a huge supporter of First Stage, probably their biggest supporter. They are a tenant of ours; they are a theatre at Tysons Corner.

We are going to figure out how to work their model and what they do into more of what we are doing as well we are cultivating a relationship with Wolf Trap. We

might end up being at a minimum a shuttle from the Metro to Wolf Trap, at our site. But also we are going to have a large outdoor performance area that we'd like to have a summer concert series, farmers markets and what have you.

Sue: That sounds very attractive. Is this your idea, who came up with the idea of the farmers market and the outside entertainment? Is this something that a board or committee or your entire group— you have a passion for this.

Aaron: I do have a strong - I don't know if it was my idea. It's also a very successful model. I mean it's not being at Arts Entertainment District is a very successful business model. So it serves both purposes, its synergy; it's the win, win for everybody. And I love Farmers Markets so we go to one every Saturday in Vienna. Um but that's all part of creating that fabric of a community in an urban area. Those are the things that bring people together. Those are the things that get people out of their apartments to meet each other. That's all part of this. I do a lot of reading about this; these are all elements that you need to have; some of it was my idea but it's definitely – if you were to take an urban planning course on how to create a good destination these are all things that you need to do – I wouldn't take credit for it.

Sue: Okay. What's the fondest memory that you have of living in this area? What, I did touch a little on this "what do you tell other people to come here" but you reminisce as a kid riding your bike and stuff. What did you miss when you were in Utah?

Aaron: The cosmopolitan nature of living here; just that you know there was – there is no diversity. And the news on the television was literally they called it World in a Minute. And you know it's been - it was just a different culture. There wasn't – it's a different mindset.

Sue: Each culture or place that you live in or visit does enrich you as a person so you come back.

Aaron: Absolutely.

Aaron: The great things about Utah were – I mean the things you could do outdoors were phenomenal and you know the quality of life there – there's no traffic you know those simple things are great. But the things that I missed the most about living in Fairfax County was the cosmopolitan nature the diverse things that we can do here. Just, we have within five hours of driving we have – driving five hours from Salt Lake City is nothing – but driving five hours from here you can be in New York City, you can be in the Carolinas. I mean –

Sue: Um hum.

Aaron: you know.

Sue: The location.

Aaron: Yeah, it's a great location. And what was my fondest memory growing up?

Sue: Yes.

Aaron: Probably graduation. Um, I ended up graduating from Langley but my parents moved my senior year I had friends at both schools. I just had a lot of friends growing up. But graduating and you know and having, and knowing at point that you had such a phenomenal education cause the schools here are so good. I just felt so equipped and ready for the world. You know I felt I was going off to college but I just felt like I had this advantage because I was from here.

Supreme Court Justice Scalia spoke at my graduation. You know all these things were just so powerful. And you know it's a memory because I didn't know it at the time, but definitely living in Utah you really within a few years you realize how great we have it here. How great the community is how everybody at my high schools everybody's parents was somebody. These people were very educated very interesting, very colorful and those are all things, that you know, weren't necessarily there in entirety in others places – until I went there I thought – I came with this perspective that was diverse.

Sue: Which is the way you are raising your children?

Aaron: Absolutely.

Sue: Would you like one of them to perhaps be interested and get into the same line of work at some point?

Aaron: I love it; I mean it is, it is we are planning a city. And to me that is just the neatest opportunity, you know it's very exciting.

Sue: Um hum.

Aaron: And very interesting and so if they want to do that I will be very supportive of them but I would never push anything on them. My parents never pushed this on me.

Linda: How old are they now?

Aaron: I have a 3 year old and a 2 year old so.

Sue: Babies.

Aaron: Oh yeah, well almost 2 and almost 4 so.

Sue: Did your wife grow up in this area?

Aaron: No she's from Oklahoma.

Sue: Oh.

Aaron: We met in college and you know she – it took a little bit of an adjustment for her but she loves it here too. And the kids here and the schools here are just – my kids will all go to public school. We could send them wherever we want but I think we are in the Madison School district and we can either pay for the same education or get it free for your tax money. So I figure, I love this and I also think the public schools are a much better rounded education, then some of my friends that went to private schools. But not to knock them, but for my kids – my personality and my wife's personality their gonna

Sue: You're finding that you're much

Aaron: It's a better fit.

Sue: Okay, ah there was one other question and I can't remember what it was.

Linda: Let me ask you about the metro coming through there – there was quite a controversy here for several years about whether to go over or under – could you speak to that a little.

Aaron: We were the second largest supporter of the over versus under campaign. We gave a lot of money to that effort. We believe that under is the better solution. We would not be willing to sacrifice rail for having it underground; we think it's not a best solution but it's better than no rail. And so that has changed the dynamics of how we are planning. The metro is a major part of what we are doing but we have ah, (phone rings) we have ah focused the development inward. For where we are we have plenty of – we are growing into what is Tysons West so we are growing towards Greensboro Drive and the new Greensboro Drive and the concept that Route 7 was going to become pedestrian friendly – fairly difficult to comprehend and the reason why is not because of the width - because you look at Pennsylvania Avenue and the streets are wide and they are pedestrian friendly. The problem with Route 7 and 123 is VDOT (Virginia Department of Transportation) we're not going to get them to bring the speeds down. The speeds are going to be at 45 miles an hour and at 35 miles an hour. It's like 80% of the traffic that goes down Route 7 is pass thru traffic. And so if we tried to knock it down to 25 where it would need to be like it is in the city we wouldn't get it; it's not a road it's a VDOT road so they would tell the jurisdiction to go fly a kite. So that's one of the challenges – it's hard to be pedestrian friendly when cars are flying by at 50 miles an hour.

Linda: Do you see us in twenty or thirty years us doing something like the big dig in Boston because of putting it – the metro over rather than under? Or do you see it being a success?

Aaron: I don't know – it will be successful.

Linda: Well you all will have to make it successful won't you with your design?

Aaron: Exactly- it's upon us to make it work. And it will work. It's worked in other jurisdictions. Um we just have to – the great places that we are going to be creating will be integrated to that above grade facility. So one of the things that we have done for example – when you come into Tysons West on the rail and you're riding the rail in we have what we're calling sky parks that are above garages. Public parks –big open spaces – acres above garages so that when you're coming down on the right and look over and see the sky park and people playing volley ball or something it will be eye level and hopefully it will make you want to go over there. It's just that you have to be innovative with your thought process and how you deal with it.

Sue: Where is such a concept the eye level that has been done before?

Aaron: where have I done that before – the sky parks have been done – there is Skyline in New York City; San Francisco's got a bunch of them because of their topography and they are planning them now and they are very successful. But the elevator rail is definitely not (phone rings) the ah oh I better get going.

Sue: You are busy.

Aaron: Yes, sorry.

Sue: And that verification I understand so that's why we appreciate. Um what else would you like to tell us? What would you like to have as part of this perspective this project – what would you like people remember you for? This is going to be out there digitally you know.

Aaron: Yes, what do I want to be remembered for creating a place that makes people's lives better. Right now people are spending a lot of time in their cars. People are spending – you know when they get off work in Tysons Corner – the 100,000 people in Tysons Corner when they get off work every day they have no choice but to go down the elevator get in their car and spend time in traffic. And I think that our project can better their lives by giving them something other than that to do; whether it be go down the street to watch a movie, catch a show you know those types of things or live there or not have a car. This is about getting people out of their cars. This is about getting people you know where people are

living in apartments and condos but are driving into Tysons Corner. I want those people to live in Tysons Corner and I think we're going to be able to do it.

Sue: Thank you.

Linda: Great thank you very much.